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SUBJECT: AUSTRIAN MEDIA HIGHLIGHTS: January 29, 2008

OeVP Edges SPOe in Recent Poll

¶1. A recent Gallup poll shows that the People's Party (OeVP) has jumped ahead of the Social Democrats (SPOe) in public opinion. The poll gives the OeVP 36 percent, an increase of one percentage point since the last poll, and the SPOe is at 33 percent, a decrease of one percentage point. The Greens have 14 percent, also up one percentage point, and the FPÖ has 13 percent, down a percentage point. The BZÖ remains at 3 percent. On the question of who Austrians would vote for if there were direct election of the chancellor, OeVP Vice-Chancellor and Finance Minister Wilhelm Molterer is ahead of SPOe Chancellor Alfred Gusenbauer for the first time. The poll gives Molterer 33 percent, up three percentage points, compared to Gusenbauer's 31 percent, down three percentage points, according to semi-official daily Wiener Zeitung.

Women's Pensions 40 Per Cent Lower Than Men's

¶2. The Austrian pension authorities have reported that the average pension of women in the country is 40.2 percent lower than the men's. The net average pension in Austria is 872 Euros a month, but women receive on average only 692 Euros whereas men average at 1,158 Euros. The net average pension increased from 740 Euros a month in 2000 to 872 in 2007. In response to the report, Greens' social spokesperson Karl Oellinger said: "It is bad enough that 2008 pension increases didn't take inflation into account and left recipients with a loss of purchasing power, but it is especially cynical that the government has actually increased social injustice in its pension policy." He added that more than half of female pensioners had received increases of only 1.7 per cent whereas men's increases had been clearly higher on average, says liberal daily Der Standard.

EU Signs Accord with Serbia

¶3. The European Union has offered Serbia closer trade relations and relaxed visa requirements, but not a full pre-membership accord. EU foreign ministers agreed on the "political interim accord" at their meeting on Monday, after efforts to conclude a fully negotiated stabilization and association agreement with Belgrade had failed in the face of opposition from The Netherlands. Serbia is holding the final round of presidential elections on Sunday, pitching a hard-line nationalist against a pro-European candidate, independent provincial daily Salzburger Nachrichten reports.

Soldiers Depart For Chad

14. Austrian Defense Minister Norbert Darabos from the Social Democrats (SPOe) will bid official farewell today to troops departing for the European Union's peacekeeping mission in Chad. Austria is sending a total of 160 soldiers for the nearly 4,000-strong EU force. The Austrian military's advance team will depart for Africa on Wednesday, with the remainder of the contingent being deployed gradually until the end of February. Austria's participation in the EU's Chad mission has been source of controversy among the country's political parties and the people for months, writes centrist daily Die Presse.

Bush Holds Final State of the Union Address

15. US President George Bush in his final State of the Union Address has urged Americans to have confidence in the US economy, but acknowledged that growth in the US is slowing. He spoke as the sale of new homes in the United States saw the largest fall since records began. Austrian radio quotes the US President as stressing that "across our country, there is a concern about our economic future. In the long run, Americans can be confident about our economic growth, but in the short run, we can all see that growth is slowing." President Bush also said increased troop numbers in Iraq were succeeding in their mission. Democratic leaders in the House of Representatives meanwhile said the speech offered "little more than the status quo."

Commenting on US President George Bush's final State of the Union Address, journalist for ORF radio Christian Lininger says on the early morning news Morgenjournal: "Major foreign and domestic policy initiatives, proposed amendments to laws - all that was missing from George Bush's State of the Union Address this time. Obviously, the President realizes that by now, his power to make significant political decision is not what it used to be. Rather, the speech was a call on Americans to show patience and confidence. In the long term, the US economy would begin to grow again, even if there were some uncertainties in the short run, Bush argued, and appealed to Congress to quickly pass the economic rescue package agreed last week. (...) Next, Bush turned to last year's Iraqi troop surge:

'Ladies and gentlemen, some may deny the surge is working, but among the terrorists there is no doubt. Al Qaeda is on the run in Iraq, and this enemy will be defeated.' However, patience was required in Iraq as well, Bush continued. Despite the recent success, some tough battles still lay ahead. The President voiced his scepticism with regard to a US troop pullout from Iraq that exceeds the announced level. Progress achieved in Iraq must not be gambled away, Bush said. Furthermore, he again urged Tehran to stop its uranium enrichment activities, and warned of a clear response, should Iran threaten US troops. However, his statements offered nothing new beyond the already well-known positions regarding Tehran."

In centrist daily Die Presse, Washington correspondent Norbert Rief looking back on Bush's term of office, asks: "What will be the legacy of the 43rd President of the United States, of the man who united and divided the country like no US political leader before him?" In his State of the Union Address yesterday, "Bush should have taken stock of his eight years in office, but there is little to show for: His major political goals remained unrealized, (...) and he will spend his final months in the Oval Office as a 'lame duck,' opposed by a Congress that can block all his projects. (...) What remains of the 43rd President of the US? He will go down in history as a man who, after the attacks of September 11, united the country like no one before him; and who, at his re-election three years later, politically divided it more deeply than since the time of the Vietnam War. He led the US into an unloved war the country will not get out of any time soon; and with his foreign policy, he made sure America lost a great deal of international support and esteem. The wonderful dream he announced to the world at his inauguration in 2005, to spread peace and democracy, burst like a bubble in the face of developments in Iraq. (...) Whoever wins the presidency in November, will also inherit the results of Bush's military intervention in Iraq. This war used up all of Bush's second term of office, and left little room for the usual political freedom of someone who no longer has to deal with the strain of re-election. The 'political capital' he wanted to bring to play after his election victory in 2004 remained lying idle. Meanwhile, Bush became one of the least popular presidents the United States has ever had. After a historic 88 percent of support after 9/11, he is now plodding along at around 30 percent. Historians are already debating

whether he may emerge not only as the least popular, but also the worst President in US history. (...) All in all, Bush's final State of the Union Address was the beginning of a rather long farewell. The 'lame duck' will waddle on for almost another year."

Decisive Vote in Florida

16. All Austrian media continue to focus on the nomination process for the US presidential election, where primaries are being held in Florida today. Republican contenders for their party's nomination are facing a crucial primary in the southern state today. Former New York Mayor Rudy Giuliani, who has been relying on a win in Florida for the nomination, is trailing in the polls. Austrian media agree that the result of the primary will decide whether Giuliani stays in the running or not. Most commentators believe, however, that the contest for the Republican nomination will be decided between presidential hopefuls John McCain and Mitt Romney. For both the Republicans and the Democrats today's primary is a decisive step, one week ahead of Super Tuesday: It is the first vote in a major US state, Austrian media explain.

All major Austrian media comment and report on the upcoming primary in Florida, and what the vote might mean for the presidential hopefuls among both major parties in the US. Running the headline "Rudy's hope in Florida," independent provincial daily Salzburger Nachrichten explains that the former New York Mayor is only now entering into the race for the White House. Experts have called Giuliani's strategy not to campaign in Iowa, New Hampshire and South Carolina "bizarre," and argue that if his plan succeeds, he would be a "genius," the daily writes. But despite his campaign efforts in Florida recently, things are not looking good for the "Mayor of America." In polls, he has dropped behind rivals John McCain and Mitt Romney. In a similar vein, mass-circulation tabloid Kronen Zeitung suggests the Florida primary will be the day determining the future of Giuliani's campaign. Centrist daily Die Presse meanwhile argues Giuliani is "playing roulette in Florida." Only a few months ago the former Mayor of New York was so far ahead in the polls the question was whether anyone could beat him. Now, people are asking themselves if there's still anyone out there he can beat, the daily's Washington correspondent Norbert Rief says. Similarly, liberal daily Der Standard says that Giuliani is "banking on Florida entirely."

Kilner